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## Perceptions of poverty in small-town Russia

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### *Abstract:*

*The paper reviews some of the perceptions and categorizations of poverty found through a study of participatory approaches to poverty reduction in provincial Russia. It draws on theorizations of poverty as a subjective reality which is socially constructed and maybe differently perceived by different subsections of the populations. The paper argues that perceptions of poverty matter because they feed into both formal categorizations of need and entitlement to assistance or support and more informal, cultural understandings of impoverishment which may be morally and emotionally inflected.*

*Keywords: perceptions of poverty, categorization, families, deserving, undeserving, social exclusion.*

Poverty has been studied by sociologists, economists, anthropologists, geographers and many others for a long time. Over the years there have been considerable developments and debates regarding the concept itself and the most useful ways of studying it. Early studies which focused primarily on economic and absolute measurements of poverty (Rowntree 1901) have subsequently been contested by others arguing for the need to explore in more depth the experiences of poor people from a variety of social, cultural and economic perspectives (Beresford et al. 1999; Lister 2007). This has included increasing acceptance in both academic and policy circles of poverty as a relative phenomenon (Townsend 1954). Amartya Sen's influential capabilities approach brought a sharp focus to debates surrounding the different ways in which poverty both affects and constrains livelihoods, well-being and agency and related this directly to pertinent questions regarding the development of effective strategies for poverty reduction (Sen 1985; Deneulin and McGregor 2010).

Further pursuit of debate and theorization of poverty as at least in part a socially constructed and culturally experienced phenomenon has often led to heated disagreements and controversies. Lewis' introduction of the concept of a 'culture of poverty' in the 1960s had a perhaps unintended impact on policy debates in the USA at the time, supporting an ideologically driven view of poverty as 'pathological' and transferable between generations due to the dysfunctional values and behaviours of poor people themselves (Goode and Maskovsky: 2001, p.10). Diverting attention away from the structural causes of poverty, and its perpetuation, such theories were also critiqued for focusing on passivity, dependency and the negative aspect of poor people's agency, rather than giving attention to political and collective action on the part of the poor (Goode and Maskovsky: 2001, p. 14). As such, they contributed to much longer standing processes by which the poor are divided into 'deserving' and 'undeserving' categories, facilitating criteria for and, importantly, exclusions from eligibility for programmes of public

support and assistance (Fraser and Gordon, 2002). As Howe has pointed out, a particularly important, and pernicious, aspect of such definitions of deservingness and the moral categorizations of respectability, responsibility and contribution upon which they draw, is that these are often at least tacitly acknowledged and shared by those experiencing poverty as well as by welfare officers and other members of the community (Howe 1998). A critical analysis of locally inflected attitudes towards and understandings of poverty therefore provides a significant contribution to attempts to understand the workings of a welfare support system, both in relation to how it is conceived through policy and implemented by professional and bureaucratic personnel (cf. Lipsky, 1983) and in relation to how it is experienced and understood by those living in poverty themselves.

Historically, many of the above debates and the empirical studies which they have inspired and/or drawn upon, have focused on either West European and North American contexts or on the countries of 'the developing world'. However, in the aftermath of the collapse of communist regimes in the Former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe there has been increasing scholarly and policy interest in issues relating to poverty and ways of dealing with it in these parts of the world also. Whilst initial approaches were dominated by statistical measurements and analyses (Korchagina, Ovcharova, 1998; Shevyakov, Kiruta, 2001; Ovcharova, 2003; Korchagina, 2005; Migranova, 2013), more recent studies have challenged 'official designations' of poverty due to their over emphasis on measuring monetary incomes and expenditures and failure to take sufficient account of other aspects of poverty such as access to public services and impacts on health and other 'capabilities' (Rimashevskaya et al, 2001). Other researches (Bondarenko, 2005) studied changes in perceptions of poverty during the time. Bondarenko N. points out differences in attitude to poverty in the 1990<sup>th</sup> and 2000<sup>th</sup>. In first case poverty in mass opinion had a very close connection to economic situation in Russia in general, was a result of outer, not personal reasons. Poverty was widespread (Bogomolova, Tapilina, 2005), and at that time to be poor was a kind of norm, standard. In the 2000<sup>th</sup> the attitude towards the poor changed, moved to relativistic, in terms of deprivation. The division between "deserving" and "undeserving" poor came into a sight.

A growing body of research in recent years has begun to interrogate the meanings and definitions of poverty and marginality in Russian and other 'postsocialist' contexts from both historical and contemporary standpoints. Thus, Khlinovskaya-Rockhill's study of state provision of care for children removed from their families in both Soviet and post-Soviet contexts, explores intersecting definitions of poverty and 'deviance' which both transcend and inform processes of political, economic and institutional change (Khlinovskaya-Rockhill 2010). Stephenson's work on homelessness raises similar questions and concerns about the interlinking of social, cultural and economic exclusions and the designation of certain categories of the poor as 'subhuman'

(Stephenson, 2006). Bringing insights from the local level, anthropological studies of poverty and social assistance across a range of post-socialist rural contexts have explored the ways in which constructions of poverty and need shape access to both formal and informal forms of poverty relief and service provision (Schwarz 2012; Kay 2011; Thelen et al. 2011).

This chapter aims to contribute to this growing body of work exploring attitudes towards and understandings of poverty, not simply for the purposes of an academic interest in unpicking and critiquing 'discourse' (cf. Goode and Maskovsky, 2001, p.15), but rather more significantly, in order to shed light on the ways in which such understandings shape the experiences of families and individuals living with, or on the verge of poverty. The chapter draws on the findings of a research project exploring "Participatory approaches to Poverty reduction: perspectives from small-town Russia", for which fieldwork was conducted in a small-provincial town of Nizhegorodskaya oblast in November 2011 (the first stage of the research took place in an earlier project: "Participatory approaches to Poverty reduction: mechanisms of public participation" conducted in the city of Nizhny Novgorod in 2010) (cf. Ivashinenko, 2011, Varyzgina, 2012), for which fieldwork was conducted. The article draws primarily on interview data from 35 semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with local residents and families experiencing poverty, professionals from local social service structures, leaders of charitable and other nongovernmental organizations as well as representatives of the local administration.

## **Defining Poverty**

Our study revealed that there was neither a shared and clear definition of poverty nor consensus about how best to reduce or overcome it amongst respondents, including those directly employed in services and structures designed to contribute to poverty-relief programmes. This lack of clarity and consensus may in part stem from an absence of public debate at both national and local levels. This is reflected in media coverage where as a recent study has found, there is much commentary on the widespread nature of poverty and generalized discussion of the problems in overcoming it, but scant if any attention to the actual causes and consequences of poverty, nor to detailed discussion of social policy initiatives (Teodorovich, 2009, p. 452). As McKendrick et al. point out:

Although it would be naive to attribute public attitudes towards poverty and public support for antipoverty initiatives solely to the mass media, it is important to acknowledge the pivotal role of the mass media in reflecting and influencing public ideas of poverty

(McKendrick et al 2008, p. 7)

In the absence of media coverage or discussion, local residents and specialists alike struggled to judge the extent of poverty locally, confining themselves instead to generalizations and vague assessments such as 'Living standards in our town are generally pretty low' (social pedagogue in a school).

This vagueness seemed in part to stem from an acknowledgement of the inadequacy of 'official' definitions of poverty based on calculations of regional subsistence minimums and artificially established minimum wages, which have long been far too low for families to live well on. Some respondents, especially those with professional insight into the workings of the welfare system, did refer to these officially defined thresholds either in discussing poverty more generally, or in explaining their own circumstances, however there was often an implicit criticism in these discussions, as well as vagueness and confusion about the precise levels of thresholds:

Well, the official version is that they are people whose income falls below the subsistence minimum. The subsistence minimum in Nizhegorodskii region is now round about 5600rub for working person.

*(Staff member, Local administration):*

The way it works out my family fits the criteria, because I'm not earning at the moment, I don't have any income at all, we have two small children, and my husband earns 15000 rubles a month. If we're supposed to have about 6500 rubles per person in our region, then we are below the poverty line.

*(Lawyer-private entrepreneur, not currently claiming any benefits)*

Other respondents rejected such official definitions more explicitly, sometimes pointing out that attempts to define poverty in absolute terms were out of date. They did not however use standardized definitions of relative poverty as the situation of those with incomes falling below 60% of average per capita incomes either<sup>1</sup>. Instead, respondents attempted to explain poverty in intuitive and often personalized terms.

Aware that many of those who might fall above these official poverty thresholds, were nonetheless struggling to get by, respondents drew on more open understandings of poverty illustrating their observations with examples from their own experiences and those of neighbours and acquaintances. In doing so they tended to avoid using a specific terminology of 'poverty' (*bednost'*) or referring directly to people as 'poor' (*bednye*). If used at all these terms were referred to in the context of generalized discussions, but not when describing specific situations or people. In these more specific contexts 'professional' respondents tended to use the official definition of 'people with low income' (*maloimushie*). As shown in Table 1 below, both professionals and other respondents also used a range of terms referring either to people's economic and social circumstances or to their belonging to other social categories deemed synonymous with experiences of poverty

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<sup>1</sup> See for example: <http://www.poverty.org.uk/summary/social%20exclusion.shtml>, or <http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/poverty-definitions.pdf> for standardised measures of relative poverty in European contexts

**Table 1: commonly used terms for describing those experiencing poverty**

Terms describing circumstances	Terms using other social characteristics and identities as synonyms for poverty
Low income citizens; Low paid; Those who live less well; People in difficult circumstances; People in impoverished circumstances; People with incomes below the subsistence minimum; People living below the lowest standards; People in need; People in need of assistance; The deeply needy; Families with limited income; People with lots of problems; Those below the poverty line; Those who are badly dressed	Families with many children; Young families; Single parent families; Problem families; Families registered with social services; Elderly, Pensioners; Unemployed; Homeless; Alcoholic

Looking at these different categories and descriptors for poverty again, it is possible to discern four main tendencies in discussion on poverty:

- Poverty as lowered consumption, deprivation
- Poverty as misfortune
- Poverty as a disease and a source of danger to society
- Poverty as stigma

Amongst these tendencies, the first two are relatively objective and non-judgmental, the second two are much more subjective and introduce moralizing discourses and value judgments to discussions of poverty as pathological and socially threatening. There's hardly any correlation among perception of poverty and categories of the interviewed. Teachers, social workers, unemployed, families and individuals living with or on the verge of poverty, as categories don't seem to have any peculiar opinion towards poverty. All the four discourses can be represented among the different categories of the interviewed. The following sections explore each of these tendencies in more detail.

#### Poverty as lowered consumption, deprivation

The majority of our respondents described poverty in objective terms as an experience of material deprivation, a lack of financial and other resource and a lower standard of living. Many of them offered rather detailed descriptions of the ways in which families with low incomes were forced to restrict their consumption of goods or services. Here poverty was defined not only in terms of low income or low consumption of things and services, but also in terms of low quality

nutrition, restricted or lacking access to education and health care, poor housing conditions and problems with indebtedness.

If a member of staff should notice for instance that a family is really so poor, then of course they will definitely call them up and offer to help them with clothing or maybe give them vouchers for hot food. Where there are situations like this of desperate need of course.

*(Professional working with children with disabilities)*

We can't afford to install PVC windows in the house, because it is very expensive, really expensive. We don't want to take out another loan. We can't pay off the debts we already have.

*(Mother, low income family)*

In this sense our respondents reflected the arguments of Ocharova and Rimashevskaya (2001) and others that poverty cannot be measured in terms of income alone, but must take account of individual's and families' wider access to goods, services and opportunities. Families on the edge of poverty may be forced to save on accommodation costs, nutrition, clothes or footwear. Other studies have shown that such families spend less money on holidays and leisure time and sometimes are simply unable to take holidays at all. In Klimova's study of the working poor this was the case for 50% of respondents (Klimova, 2004). Such restrictions on consumption might also be seen to feed into Sen's understanding of poverty in terms of capabilities and the relationship between poor people's access to material, psychological, physical and social resources and opportunities (Sen, 1985). The restricted capabilities that flow from restricted consumption do not only define their present circumstances but also circumscribe their opportunities and resources to change these circumstances for the future.

And yet, impoverished families and individuals also strive to meet the consumption norms which they see around them, perhaps as a way of inscribing their belonging to, and staving off exclusion from the wider society. Thus, several of the families we interviewed explained that as well as restricting spending in areas which might be considered fundamental such as housing or clothing, they also, on occasion, indulged in what might be viewed as non-essential spending, almost by way of compensation. Thus the same respondent who describes above the family's lack of resource to improve their housing by installing PVC windows, went on to explain:

Yes, we have to restrict ourselves in many ways. We don't exactly live it up. We haven't got any spare for that. We don't spoil ourselves, but if we want to try something, we'll buy a little taster of something we've been really longing for

*(Mother, low income family)*

Such practices might be seen to reflect Veblen's theories of 'conspicuous consumption' as a striving to replicate the lifestyles and consumption of those with higher social status and greater economic security (cf. Veblen 1989, p. 84).

In this sense, there was also an aspect of tendencies to define poverty in terms of consumption which was relative and comparative. For our respondents poverty was defined not so much in relation to someone's ability to meet the consumption norms of the rich, or even the comfortable, but rather as below their own, or what they perceived as 'average'. Poor families were not excluded from the same desires and aspirations as everyone else, but they were unable to fully participate due to constrained resources (cf. Davidova 2003, p. 88-96). Respondents very rarely alluded directly to 'wealth' or 'poverty' as fixed categories, but rather were inclined to make statements like, 'life is good for some people, for others it is difficult'. In making such comparisons, people often used their own families as a standard, describing and defining poverty as 'those who live worse than we do'. Interestingly in this way, they maintained a perception or representation of their own family as 'normal' or 'average', even where in some cases they too may have been coping in rather constrained circumstances, or even have per capita incomes which would see them officially designated as 'poor'. This reluctance to categorize one's own experiences as poverty will be returned to below in the section on poverty as stigma.

### Poverty as misfortune

For a significant subset of our respondents, poverty was viewed primarily as the result of misfortune, a consequence of external circumstances that people could not themselves control, for example the state of the national economy, fire damage to one's house, redundancy etc. Understanding poverty in this way has deep historical roots in Russian culture (Teodorovich, 2009, p.10). Indeed the words 'poverty' (*bednost'*) and misfortune or trouble (*beda*) are etymologically linked. In the early period of post-socialist transformations studies in a number of countries found that poverty was viewed in this way as a widespread misfortune, imposed on people as victims of the 'transition process' and as such, unequivocally the responsibility of the state. (Falowska 1997 cited in Studenna 2010, p. 196). And yet, more recent studies have revealed that as the immediate crisis of transformation has passed and increasing stratification in these societies has resulted in greater differentiation, new 'neoliberal' understandings of poverty as individualized and pathological also converge in sometimes mutually reinforcing ways with an emphasis on labour participation and contribution from the era of state socialism (Thelen et al. 2011; Kay 2011).



Nonetheless in our study, respondents did continue to recognize poverty, at least in some instances, as the consequence of circumstances beyond the individual's control. Redundancies and wage insecurities brought about by the closure of the town's major industrial employers for example, were seen to have effected many and in a rather arbitrary fashion. As one professional (from the district centre for social-economic monitoring) explained, 'There are problems everywhere. Firstly, two of our big factories have closed down. That means people lost jobs and wages'. Other examples of poverty as misfortune described in interviews included several references to homelessness as the result of fire in the town's many wooden houses, and the loss of a breadwinner through ill-health, death or divorce. In cases of this nature, families were commonly viewed as deserving of support and assistance and charitable actions as well as informal collective assistance was often mobilized.

If someone is in trouble, everyone in school helps out. Last winter there was an accident – a house burned down, an old, wooden one. It happened at night and the people ran out into the snow, barely dressed. They didn't manage to take anything with them from the house. First, teachers and kids from the school brought things for them. Then when everyone else in our settlement got to know about it, we had a collection and they started to bring more things. When someone experiences a misfortune, everyone helps out. It's the done thing.

*(Social pedagogue, local secondary school)*

Redundancy was also generally viewed as a misfortune both for the person directly affected and for their families. However, as explored in more detail in the following section long-term worklessness, especially where this is accompanied by addiction and other social or family issues is often viewed with considerably less sympathy.

Losing a job was described by many as synonymous with an experience of poverty. And yet, statistics show that at least 50% of the poor in contemporary Russia can best be described as 'working poor', in other words those whose work is precarious and poorly paid (Bobkov et al. 2004, p. 40). Our respondents certainly also related to the image of the working poor and frequently offered examples from amongst their acquaintances of kindergarten teachers, school teachers, budget-sector employees, all of whom they saw as experiencing poverty due to circumstances beyond their control, namely the structure of wages and wider economic situation in the country. As one school teacher explained,

People can work from dawn till dusk, at two different jobs, but they don't have the right qualifications and so the jobs are low paid. Or it might be a worker in the budget sector, on a middle or low pay scale. They find themselves in difficult circumstances which are basically beyond their control

*(School teacher in smaller rural settlement).*

Dedication to a low paid job and a reluctance to seek alternative employment was not regarded as evidence of laziness or dysfunction, although the overt rejection of such interpretations by respondents may suggest that they are not so uncommon.

If someone has low wages, it doesn't mean that they are lazy. They might work hard from dawn till dusk and still have a low income. So it's hard to see how they can get out of this situation?

*(School teacher, social pedagogue).*

Such assertions seem to tally with the self-perceptions, self-representation of the working poor themselves who do not see themselves as lazy or personally responsible for their predicament but rather as members of the 'deserving poor' often associated with taking an active, rather than 'passive' position through employment and other engagements (Kay 2011; Howe 1998).

Where poverty is interpreted in these ways, responsibility for finding solutions is placed squarely in the realm of the state and government. As one trade union leader put it:

To be honest, responsibility for family poverty is a state responsibility. Heads of local administration, governors, the government should deal with it... It should be solved by the state and through the use of government resources at local, federal, municipal level. Clearly defined steps need to be taken. The first thing to solve is the minimum wage".

*(Trade Union Leader)*

As explained above, even a permanent job is not enough to guarantee sufficient income in order for a family to escape an experience of poverty (Bobkov et al. 2004, p.15) and a low wage 'trap' keeps people fully occupied in one or several jobs, in some cases impacting negatively on their health or family relationships and reducing their capabilities to engage in other activities which might mitigate against long term family poverty. And yet, respondents agreed that unemployment was an even more serious problem.

For most of our interviewees, there was a strong automatic association between unemployment and poverty. Amongst the professionals interviewed, unemployment was often raised as the most significant factor influencing not only poverty but a wider and connected range of social issues in the town.

As they say, trouble always comes in threes. It works out like this: there are redundancies, then there are problems at home, parents are lost, or heaven forbid something happens to a child. Everyone's situation is different, but they come to us and their eyes are so empty. We try to support them, to get them to take themselves in hand. You have to feel sorry for people. Obviously it is not their fault that all this has happened, but then all these other problems start coming down on them too. It's a shame for everyone.

Thus loss of employment can quickly become associated with wider patterns of social insecurity and exclusion, where those without work are not seen as making a useful social contribution and quickly lose social status and respectability (cf. Kay 2011). This can make redundancies and periods of unemployment, especially where they are protracted, difficult for people to accept. Whilst redundancy itself may be seen as an external misfortune, the problems it brings with it such as psychological issues, family breakdown, alcoholism, loss of social contacts, social exclusion and apathy may be viewed more equivocally. Amongst our respondents there was a degree of understanding of the difficulties of dealing with unemployment, especially in the longer term, and yet, the extent to which people are able to cope in socially acceptable ways significantly influenced assessments of 'deservingness' and the apportioning of responsibility for one's own predicament.

In our settlement for example, alcoholism is on the rise, it's just blooming. And what's more women are drinking to, they are becoming drunkards. You see them walking about, they look in a right state. ... It's mainly people with low incomes. And what can you do? If there's no work to be had, you start getting into debt. I watched my neighbour fall to drink in just 3 years. Now he is a total alcoholic. He used to have a family: husband, wife, two children. They were a great family, with no problems. Everything was great. He worked, she worked, their sons were grown up, one got married, the other went to the army. But then there was some kind of conflict between them and his wife left. He took to drinking. He drank everything away, the house, the garage, the car, everything.

*(Lawyer, entrepreneur)*

As stated above, unemployment in and of itself was generally viewed as an external misfortune, and even the pull to drink amongst those who had lost their jobs was sometimes viewed with understanding. Respondents interpreted this sometimes as a response to the psychological shock of redundancy and a temporary symptom of a person in need of assistance and support from those around them. However quite the opposite was true of those seen as succumbing to heavy drinking as a life-style choice. Here some far more judgmental attitudes towards poverty and its associated misfortunes came to the fore.

### Poverty as a disease and a source of danger to society

Discussions of poverty with our respondents revealed different levels of emotional engagement with poverty and its various manifestations and experiences. Whilst some took a rather distant and analytical stance, others expressed feelings of empathy towards the poor. Yet others revealed highly judgmental attitudes, distancing themselves morally and socially from the poor

who were blamed for their own predicament and viewed as rather threatening and dangerous. In the words of one young mother, 'Where there's poverty, there's always someone who's a drunk, either the mother or the father, but one way or another' (Natalie, a young mother). Here and elsewhere poverty was described not as the result of an external misfortune but as a symptom of deviance and pathology within the family and of poor people themselves. This was also the case in discussion with professional respondents. For example a psychologist who viewed poverty and alcoholism as closely interrelated, explained, 'It's very closely linked to alcoholism. If you take the example of an alcoholic, then he is usually someone who has lost his job and lives on the verge of poverty if he's not already at rock bottom. These people are most often unemployed' (*Psychologist at NGO*). Families experiencing long term unemployment, poverty and alcoholism were viewed by many respondents as social parasites, bringing problems to those around them and for the wider society. Whilst their needs might have to be met, this was seen as an undeserved form of assistance and a burden on society.

Echoing Lewis' theorizations of the 'culture of poverty' (Lewis 1966) as transferable between generations, respondents sometimes also used references to disease, inherent weakness and even a risk of infection in describing poverty as a social scourge. Here particular attention was paid to the upbringing of children in poor families, and whilst there may be some sympathy for the difficulties children experience, there were also many assumptions about categories of 'problem families':

I teach the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. I know there are 3-4 low income families in the class of which one is a large single-parent family. They live with just their dad, and it has to be said he's not much of a dad. There are some older brothers and sisters, but I teach the younger girls. They're a real problem. They have difficulties all the time with studying, and everything is just always somehow not quite right with them. There are low income families, and there are children from single-parent families. There are families where it's just Mum. That is Dad did his thing and disappeared off somewhere. You see other children, who have a mum and a dad, and you can see they are strong and sure of themselves. These children just aren't like that. They are already kind of 'coming apart at the seams' or something. Maybe it's because mums who are trying to be both mum and dad are too domineering, maybe that's why they turn out so weak and weedy.

*(School teacher, small rural settlement)*

Another professional respondent took this analogy of weakness, infection and pathology a step further specifically describing such families as 'socially dangerous':

We don't have a specific institution to provide social assistance to these families. Basically for low income families, large families, those who as a rule have a low standard of living and other socially dangerous families.

*(Member of staff, rehabilitation center for disabled children)*

Attitudes of this nature appear to resonate closely with views of poverty as deviance and the individualization of pathology and blame, which have been associated elsewhere with the discourses and policies of neoliberalism (cf. Goode and Maskovsky 2001; Kingfisher 2001). Indeed they may well draw on new economic and political contexts. However, it is also important to point out that similar discourses particularly in relation to single-parents, alcoholism and worklessness can be traced through the period of state socialism, adding a degree of familiarity and continuity to such rhetoric which can make it all the more widespread and socially acceptable. (cf. Stephenson, 2006; Khlinovskaya-Rockhill 2010)

Continuing this trend, questions of children and their upbringing were also specifically linked to issues of work ethic and a culture of employment, or it's lack, which had particular connotations for views on deservingness and need in such families:

The kids pick this up from their parents. They aren't taught from children, they don't see their parents working so they don't have any example to follow. Children from low income families aren't hard-workers; they don't know how to work, they don't have it in them. Children from better off families, they are the ones who work. They get it. They see their parents working and they work themselves. Children from low income families are lazy. That's why they are poor, that's where it all comes from. Even the children are lazy, very-very lazy. They want money, but they don't want to work for it.

*(Mother, low income family)*

An interesting point about this particular interviewee was that her participation in the study came about on the basis of a recommendation from a local charitable organization where she and her family had been receiving assistance. Although she revealed little of her personal circumstances during the interview and constantly distanced herself morally from the low income families who she saw as deviant and worthy of blame, her clothing and demeanor as well as the description of her family provided by the head of the charity, suggested her own circumstances were far from comfortable. Here we see then an example of Howe's point that those experiencing poverty, or on the verge of it, are not immune to the wider moralizing discourses and normative understandings of virtue which circulate in their social context (Howe 1998). Moreover, where poverty is stigmatized and poor families or individuals blamed for their own predicament, or worse still viewed as potentially threatening to the rest of society, the motivation to differentiate oneself and one's family from such a category is increased.

### Poverty as stigma

As demonstrated in the previous example, respondents were keen to distance themselves from experiences of poverty, and even those who expressed more generally sympathetic attitudes to the misfortunes of others, had no desire to be seen as part of this group themselves (Varyzgina, A., 2013). Many respondents who discussed the problems of impoverished fellow townspeople and families, emphasized in conclusion that they were not poor themselves, accentuating the point that they have nothing in common with the poor. Some explicitly commented on the difficulty of admitting to experiences of poverty, 'They won't name themselves poor. As for myself, I won't call myself poor, because I don't want to be in such a category' (*Mother of large, low income family*). Even those who were open about experiencing financial and other difficulties were reluctant to claim a label of 'poverty' which is stigmatized and which, they explained, could lead others to distance themselves leading to further isolation and additional problems as a result. Families expressed particular concern about the impact this could have on children:

It's easy to see the attitudes which other children have towards children from low income families. They are scornful of them. There's a girl Sveta, she's from a low income family. They aren't all that nice to her. Firstly, she's not as well dressed; sometimes the zip on her trousers won't fasten, something must be broken with it. She went around with an open zip for days. I don't know what her parents are thinking of. Because you might not live well, but that doesn't mean that you should simply not look after your children properly. How can it be – not to notice your child's zip is broken? You can always fix it, sew on a new one. So they (the children) weren't very nice to her. They were like 'don't sit next to us'. I tell them they shouldn't be like that. How would you feel if somebody treated you that way? Would you like it? So I try to bring them in line. They do ok as long as I'm there, but once they're away from me ...

*(Leader of children's club, mother of young son, divorced, living with parents)*

Other professionals, often teachers, pointed out that the question of consumption and the need to fit in with wider social norms in this sense, as discussed earlier, was also often a cause of concern for children and could complicate relationships between children and parents in families with restricted means. It was argued that whilst some children understood their parents' predicament and asked for very little, others tried to push their parents to give them things so that they would not fall behind in comparison to the consumption of their peers. For these children poverty was already recognized as shameful and they sought to hide any issues from those around them.

Children have definitely become more materialistic as you might say. Things matter to them. Almost everyone has a computer. But still there are families who can't afford it.

And children, some of them are very ashamed of it. Some try to conceal the poverty of their family. Some children make demands on their parents: 'give me it, buy it for me. I don't want to look worse than the others'. Problems like that. And somehow it then grows into a bigger problem in the relationships between children and their parents. I've come across families like this. At first the parents try, they buy the children this and that, but then they don't know what to do. This is also where it all comes from. They don't have the money, but they try all the same, and in the end ...'

*(Teacher)*

As this teacher points out, parents in low income families can find themselves in an impossible set of circumstances. They do not wish to upset their children, or to expose them to stigma, ridicule or isolation from other children. They also strive to conceal their poverty and fear that teachers and others may see them as 'bad' parents and undeserving families, because they are perceived not to care for their children properly or to fulfill the duties of good, respectable parents. As the teacher's commentary regarding the girl with the broken zip in the previous quotation shows, such censorious attitudes do exist. The stigma of poverty therefore puts added demands on constrained budgets and on the often limited time resources of low income parents, and as such, may further reduce the capacities of these families to deal effectively with their circumstances.

Perhaps nowhere was this more clearly demonstrated than in the reluctance of some of the most materially and financially insecure to seek, or even to accept assistance, particularly if this comes with a 'label' of poverty. This was reflected in the first stage of research for this project, when interviews conducted in the social service departments in Nizhny Novgorod revealed a particular reluctance on the part of respondents to talk about benefit claims based on means testing or other categorizations of 'poverty' and 'need'. By contrast those benefits that were viewed as entitlements based on contributions and positive identity categories such as old-age pensions, payments for veterans and entitlements for parents or children were discussed openly and claimed as a 'right' rather than necessarily on the basis of 'need'. Similarly in interviews and more informal discussions which took place during the second stage of the research, respondents presented mixed attitudes to claiming benefits. On the one hand some of the apparently most needy (based on their descriptions of their housing conditions, health concerns, ratio of wage-earners to other family members etc.) were cautious about claiming benefits or accepting assistance, for example in the form of second-hand clothes for their children or vouchers for free meals, insisting instead 'I can clothe my children myself!'. On the other hand respondents who certainly also experienced constrained circumstances, but were able to present themselves as 'respectable' and 'deserving' through their employment and/or family status were much more assertive and open about claiming entitlements and pooling resources.

For example a young mother, working as a production assistant at a local television station and living together with her husband, children and her parents explained that they had applied for child benefits, even though she saw the sums received as derisory.

Sure we get free milk and dairy products for my son. We also get 100 rubles in child benefit. It's a laughable sum of money. And to get it you have to collect all sorts of references, proving that you are really in need. Social work specialists came to our home to inspect our housing conditions and see if we really are poor. They asked us if we manage our household separately from that of my parents. We said 'yes, that's why we have two fridges'. We stocked them up in advance so they were full of food. I don't know if they believed us or not.

*(Mother with a young son, divorced, living with parents)*

This narrative is interesting in that it reveals both a confidence in this particular respondent to claim her entitlements, but also the potential humiliations and uncertainties of the process involved. Moreover the detail regarding the fridges adds an interesting ambiguity even to this case. Ensuring the fridges are well stocked is evidence that the two households are not interdependent and therefore must be separately means tested, but also demonstrates a certain level of 'respectability' and 'self-reliance' that proves 'deservingness' even if it might run counter to claims of more desperate need. It is not difficult to imagine how such 'performance' and 'identity management' might be too challenging for others, particularly those who feel most precarious in their material and/or social status.

However, a reluctance to claim benefits might backfire for poor people or families as a way of achieving more respectable or deserving status. Indeed failure to claim benefits and entitlements was referred to by several respondents as the ultimate evidence of a 'passive' and 'lazy' response to poverty, which was heavily criticized.

We try to work with families with low incomes, but they are too lazy even to apply for benefits. They say that they are busy, but we know them, they're just too lazy to get all the necessary documents together and to go and register

*(Professional, social pedagogue in school)*

If a person doesn't want to help themselves, you can't make them, they just won't do anything. We know some families like that. Some of them are lazy, some just don't believe they will get anything. It depends on a person's nature, a willingness to achieve, a degree of persistence

*(Young mother)*

Thus, just as with the question of consumption and children's demands discussed above, families with low incomes and especially those experiencing more severe forms of poverty and social exclusion can find themselves in a catch twenty-two situation. Perceptions of



'deservingness' demand an active stance, a willingness and ability to provide for oneself and one's family as far as possible and a particular performance of respectability and self-confidence. Those who feel unable to maintain this and withdraw from contact with social service structures, or seek to avoid making claims that might expose them and their families to unwanted scrutiny, may face further criticism for 'passivity' and 'laziness' falling further into a perceived category of 'undeservingness' as a result.

## **Conclusions**

This paper has reviewed some of the perceptions and categorizations of poverty found in our study of a small-town in provincial Russia. We draw on theorizations of poverty as a subjective reality which is socially constructed and maybe differently perceived by different subsections of the populations. We argue that perceptions of poverty matter because they feed into both formal categorizations of need and entitlement to assistance or support and more informal, cultural understandings of impoverishment which may be morally and emotionally inflected. As such poor people's access to support, both formal and informal, the extent of their inclusion in wider social structures and environments and the capabilities these forms of in/exclusion open or close for them are to some degree determined through perceptions of poverty, the attribution of responsibility and blame and concepts of deservingness and respectability.

The paper also makes clear, certain values and moralities are often shared by those experiencing a range of degrees of material comfort or insecurity. As such, perceptions of poverty and representations (including self-representations) of the poor are shaped by an acute awareness of and wish to distance oneself and one's family from stigma, blame and social censure. What is also important here is that such representations feed into and inform interpretations of practices, including those related to consumption and claiming of benefits which have a direct further impact for the predicament of poor families both in the present time and in terms of their future prospects for improving their circumstances. A more detailed discussion of families' strategies and practices for overcoming poverty is provided in the following chapter.

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